



Article

The Formation of National Identity in Contemporary Russia*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between ethnicity and nationality in forming the national identity of the Russian people, emphasizing the danger of relying on the “ethnic” model of the nation developed in Soviet social science. Analyzing the fundamental documents of the Soviet State from the 1917 Declaration of the Rights of Peoples of Russia to the last Soviet Constitution of 1977, the author points out: (1) the significant contradiction between the proclaimed right of nations to self-determination and the principle of territorial integrity and, (2) evidence that a national policy based on the ethnic nationalist model created a peculiar “hierarchy of peoples” (so-called “titular” and “not-titular” nationalities). The challenges to the Soviet Union’s national policy that took place during the 1990th and its consequences – the disappearance of the Soviet Union from the world map and subsequent movements toward breaking apart the Russian Federation (the sovereignty claims of Chechnya and some of the Volga republics) – indicate that the tasks of a multi-ethnic state, such as solving national problems and harmonizing interethnic relations, require rejecting the ideology of ethnic nationalism, and moving toward the “de-ethnicisation” of nationality and the formation of a unified civil nation. Understanding that the transition to the paradigm of Russian national identity derived from civic nationhood is a complex and lengthy process, the author develops a multi-level model of the formation of Russian national identity comprised of (1) the basic level of cultural diversity, (2) the middle level of solidarity in the overcoming of cultural differences on the basis

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of an awareness of “shared values,” and (3) the highest level of civic consciousness – the awareness of being a citizen of Russia and an understanding of the civic responsibilities this entails. Finally, the author translation of the article. outlines the role the social sciences play in the process of the formation of the national identity, pointing out the need to establish the theoretical basics of national policy, and to develop models for its implementation.

KEYWORDS

Nation, right of nations to self-determination, ethnic nationalism, civic model of nation, national identity.

This article primarily concerns those aspects of the problem of national identity that are linked to the relationship between ethnicity and nationality in the context of an analysis of Russian national identity. A wider and more multifaceted approach to the study of the phenomenon of national identity can be found in a number of works of Russian authors (Kortunov, 2008–2009).

Discussion around the topic of “nation-building” in contemporary Russia, along with the related issue of national identity, seems almost paradoxical: we are not discussing the 19th century (referred to as “the century of nationalism”, i.e. the period of the formation of nations and nation-states), but the 21st. Furthermore, let us recall that the former Soviet Union, as was repeated more than once, comprised “more than 100 nations and nationalities”, and that the so-called “national question” was proclaimed as “solved once and for all”.

Then why do the problems of nation and national identity arise now? Why does the President often talk about it; why is it the topic of heated discussions between so many politicians, experts and scientists? Evidently, it is connected with the internal and external challenges faced by contemporary Russia, as well as the need to strengthen the multi-ethnic Russian state, mitigate negative developments in the sphere of international relations and prevent ethnic conflicts. In order to more clearly understand the situation, we should remember the model of the nation that was developed as part of Soviet social science and on the basis of which the theory, ideology and practice of nation-building was developed. At its foundation was the well-known definition of I.V. Stalin,

set out in his work *Marxism and the National Question* (1913): “A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture” (Stalin, 1946, p. 296).

This definition of the nation formed the theoretical basis for the researches of Soviet social scientists involved in national and ethnic studies. One of the most influential figures in these studies was the Soviet academician Yulian Bromley, whose “theory of ethnos” was one of the key approaches to the national question. Bromley proceeds from the assumption that humanity, as a single entity in the biological sense, developed general social laws; meanwhile, many distinct historical communities were formed, among which a special place is occupied by the community, referred to as “ethnos”. According to Bromley, ethnicity is a form of human group integration with special characteristics, representing a “stable set of people who historically developed in a particular area having in common relatively stable features in terms of language, culture and mentality, as well as consciousness of its unity and differences from other similar entities (self-awareness), attached to an endonym (ethnonym)” (Bromley, 1987, p.14).

Ethnicity evolves historically. According to the “theory of ethnos”, the stages of development of an ethnic group are: family, tribe (tribal union), nationality and nation (capitalist and subsequently also socialist). In the context of the USSR, the crown of this ethnic chain – “the Soviet people” – was hailed as a new supra-ethnic and supra-national historical community. Thus, the domestic tradition is based on the understanding of the nation as a form or stage of development of an ethnic group or ethnic community. The nation, then, is ethnicity at the highest stage of its development.

From this point of view, the Soviet model of the nation on which the theory of nation building is based consists in ethnic nationalism, i.e., the conception of a nation as the natural development of the ethnic communities that historically constitute it. According to this scenario, a nation is constructed on existing ethnic relationships and patterns.

Meanwhile, it is well known that the ethnic model of the nation, i.e. ethnic nationalism, lies in contradistinction to an alternative understanding of the nation as a political, territorial-national entity

conceived in terms of civic education. In contrast to the ethnic interpretation of the nation focusing on a single history, customs, cultural elements, ethnic mobilisation and the like, the so-called “civic” model of the nation is based on the concepts of general laws, human rights and territorial citizenship. Historically, it was in the West that the first civic-territorial model of the nation predominated; in the East – in Russia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, most countries of South and East Asia – the ethnic model tended to prevail.

Here, ethnic nationalism has played a pivotal role in the creation of nations on the basis of pre-existing ethnic communities and groups. The word ‘nation’, according to Ernst Tugendhat, currently has two meanings: the first refers to ethnic groups [...], the second to the people of whom the state is comprised. The second concept of the nation [...] is essentially the first. It is also the first historically. In Article III of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789) appears the following formulation: “The principle of any sovereignty resides essentially in the Nation.” Here the word “nation” bears no relation to ethnicity, but simply refers to all people living in the territory that formerly pertained to the king (Tugendhat, 2001, p. 43).

In the Russian tradition, for a period of many decades, the nation was, of course, interpreted in ethnic terms. (The conflict between the ethnic and political grounds for the interpretation of the nature of the nation sometimes even led to misunderstandings in communication between Soviet scientists and their Western colleagues¹). However,

¹ This situation is described by the well-known French-Swiss researcher Patrick Serio. In February 1984, the French communist newspaper “L’Humanité” published an open letter written by the then General Secretary of the Communist Party of France, Jacques Marchais, in which he addressed the Central Committee to express his “lively outrage” concerning the book by the famous Soviet ethnographer Solomon Brook entitled “World Population”, published in 1983 in France and containing a description of the French nation from an “ethnodemographic” point of view. The Secretary General, accusing the author of insulting French national identity and even racism, declared that “France is not a multi-national state, this is one country, one people, the fruit of a long history.” However, in fact, the reason for such a dramatic perception of the work of Brook was simply to do with the difference in approaches to the understanding of the nature and essence of the nation, when one approaches it from the ethnic paradigm and the other from the civil-territorial (Seriot, 1995, pp. 51–52).

due to the multi-national, multi-ethnic composition of the population of the Russian Empire, then the Soviet Union – and now the Russian Federation – the reliance on an ethnic understanding of the nation in nation-building discourses is fraught with a serious danger. The most significant of these is the contradiction between the proclaimed “right of nations to self-determination” and the principle of territorial integrity.

The idea of the right of nations (peoples) to self-determination, which permeated all the fundamental documents of the Soviet state in relation to nation-building, was drawn from the 1917 Declaration of the Rights of Peoples of Russia (Article 2: “The right of the peoples of Russia to self-determination, including secession and the formation of a nation-state”) to the last Soviet Constitution of 1977 (Article 72: “Each Union Republic shall retain the right to freely secede from the USSR”). At the same time as forming the basis for a national policy, the ethnic nationalist model has created a very peculiar “hierarchy of peoples”, which impacts strongly upon national consciousness. So-called “titular” nationalities in the population of the Union Republics were conferred the status of nations, while others, including the “titular” nationalities of the autonomous Republics, were defined as “nations” or “peoples”. If we remember that the nation was treated as the highest form of ethnic development, a confused picture emerges: for example, Estonians, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Moldovans appeared “more advanced” than, for example, Ossetians, Chechens, Karels, Mordvins etc. due to their higher level of ethnic classification.

This was acutely perceived in the national self-consciousness of the respective peoples considered not “ripened” to the status of nation. Incidentally, in trying to figure out how many of the peoples of the USSR had the status of a nation (a common cliché was that “in the Soviet Union there are more than one hundred nations and nationalities”), it becomes clear that the nations, excepting the abovementioned “titular” nationalities of the 15 Union Republics, also included the Tatars and Bashkirs – apparently due to their large numbers. In this connection, it stands to reason that nation status was something received by people

living in territories having external borders with other countries, who, in the case of exercising their right to self-determination (i.e. secession from the Soviet Union and the formation of their own state), would do less harm to the unitary state than people living in internal formations. Of course, the secession of a Republic from the “single and indivisible” Union was at the time envisaged solely in terms of an abstract possibility. However, this seemingly insignificant probability also had to take into account the necessity of maintaining the inviolability of the “right of nations to self-determination.”

A great challenge to the national policy constructed on a model of ethnicity took place during the 1990s when the overall integrity of the Russian state came under serious threat. At its mature stage, when a multi-ethnic country with an extremely high level of ethnic and cultural diversity had been successfully developed, the Soviet approach to nation building resolved the national question according to the concept of “the Soviet people as a new historical, social and international community of people”.

In the opinion of the creators of this ideological structure, the Soviet people as the “multinational group of workers of town and country, the community united under the socialist system [and] Marxist-Leninist ideology, the communist ideals of the working class and the principles of internationalism” (The Soviet Encyclopedic Dictionary, 1987), on the one hand, accumulated in all the diversity of cultures of nations and ethnic groups, and on the other, synthesised or “melted down”² nations and nationalities into the new quality. If it were not characteristic of Soviet social representation of the nation as the highest form of ethnic development and the absolute predominance of the “ethnic discourse”, it would be possible to call this phenomenon the “Soviet nation” and describe the unified national residents of the country as the “Soviet people”. (It is said that in the second half of the 70s in the USSR an attempt was even made to unify the column of “nationality” in the passports of Soviet citizens: instead of “Russian”, “Tatar”, “Georgian”, “Estonian”, etc. the record offered – “Soviet”).

² Some researchers have used the metaphor of the “melting pot” borrowed from the Chicago School of Sociology to describe the phenomenon of the “Soviet people”.

The attempt to impose a Soviet identity was not accidental. Indeed, every nation in isolation has its own ethnic roots (territory, language, religion, culture, patterns of behaviour, etc.), on which basis a unique ethnic identity is formed. However, in a multi-ethnic state with the highest degree of ethnic and cultural diversity, as was the case with the Soviet Union, appeals to ethnicity in solving the national question carried a heavy freight of potential risks, including threatening the integrity of the state.

Despite the policy of suppression of national identity and its substitution with class, the approach to solving the “national question” in the Soviet Union was a form of ethnic nationalism. This became evident, in particular, in the principles of the national state apparatus of the Russian Federation. Along with those areas (initially, frontier provinces) posited on a territorial basis, were formed national-territorial entities, which, for the majority population living in them were based on ethnicity.

At the period from the end of the 80s to the beginning of the 90s, Russia was faced by the challenge of finding such forms of national government as would ensure the preservation of the multi-ethnic state. However, salvation from the threat of national disintegration was initially envisaged in a strange and contradictory model: a federal structure binding national republics that possessed unlimited sovereignty. Confirmation may be seen in the words of Boris Yeltsin, then Chairman of the Supreme Soviet and soon to become first president of Russia, which were pronounced in August 1990 just before the collapse of the USSR: “Take as much sovereignty as you can swallow. I do not want... to be a hindrance in the development of the national consciousness of each republic.” As a consequence of the “parade of sovereignties” that engulfed first the Soviet Union and then the autonomous republics within the Russian Federation, which was largely based on the “the right of nations to self-determination” being the slogan of the day, first the Soviet Union disappeared from the world map and then the Russian Federation started to literally break apart (here we recall Chechnya and the sovereignty claims on the part of the Volga republics, etc.).

The tasks of countering ethnic conflicts, solving national problems and harmonising interethnic relations require different approaches to

the understanding of the nation, national consciousness and national identity. In theoretical terms, this entails, first of all, a rejection of the traditional ethnic interpretation of the nation and of the ideology of ethnic nationalism.

The fate of the Soviet Union showed that a necessary condition for the long-term and sustainable existence of a multi-ethnic state is the formation of a unified civil nation. However, Russia is not France. The transition to the paradigm of Russian national identity derived from civic nationhood is a complex and lengthy process, one of the components of which is, so to speak, the “de-ethnicisation” of nationality. Nations do have actual ethnic origins, ethnic roots. However, the rejection of appeals to ethnicity in the practice of formation of the national identity of Russians is a necessary condition for the preservation and development of a multi-ethnic state.

The modern concept of the formation of Russian national identity, as articulated by Vladimir Putin, comes from the fact that “identity, i.e. the national idea, cannot be imposed from above, nor can it be built on the basis of an ideological monopoly.” The President offers a view of national identity as a design with a very complex structure. “... Identity derived exclusively through ethnicity or religion in the largest state having a multi-ethnic population”, was, he said, “certainly not possible.” “The formation of a civic identity based precisely on common values, patriotic consciousness, civic responsibility and solidarity, respect for the law, complicity in the fate of the motherland without losing touch with their ethnic and religious roots is a necessary condition for preserving the unity of the country” (Putin, 2013).

Thus, national identity is a complex formation, taking place at multiple levels. The primary, basic level consists of ethnic characteristics: language, religion, behavioural stereotypes, etc. This is the level of cultural diversity. It is an expression of a rich cultural heritage resulting from the interaction and mutual influence of the different cultures of the peoples living on the territory of a unified state. But within it is also concealed a significant conflict potential associated with the religious, linguistic and behavioural differences; this is expressed in the form of the ethnic dichotomy of “us” and “them”. The next level up is the

formation of unity and solidarity in the overcoming of such differences. This is the awareness of “shared values”, of which the most important is patriotism or patriotic consciousness (the president has repeatedly referred to patriotism in terms of a “national idea”), i.e. complicity in the fate of the motherland. At this level, limitations in the ethnic nationalist worldview are overcome. In more philosophical terms, it consists in the necessity of dealing with the transition from ethnic particularism to civic national universalism.

Finally, the highest level in the structure of the national identity of Russians consists in the awareness of being a citizen of Russia and an understanding of the civic responsibilities thus entailed. “Russian citizens should feel themselves responsible masters of their country, their region, their hometown, their property, their possessions and their lives,” (Putin, 2013). This is the level of freedom, responsibility, cooperation, professionalism, self-organisation and self-management. The integrated, multi-level structure of the Russian national identity determines the complexity of its formation in people’s minds. In solving this task, it is necessary for various social institutions to be involved – family, government, educational, mass media and others. Here the social sciences play an important role in taking responsibility for the establishment of the theoretical foundations of contemporary national policy, as well as developing models and strategies for its implementation in practice.

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